

DEATH:

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A

POETICAL ESSAY.

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By BEILBY PORTEUS, M.A.  
Fellow of *Christ's* College.

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THE SECOND EDITION.

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CAMBRIDGE,

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MDCCLIX. 17

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P O E T I C A L E S S A Y .

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MDCCLXV

A Clause of Mr. SEATON's Will,

Dated Oct. 8. 1738.

*I Give my Kislisbury Estate to the University of Cambridge for ever: the Rents of which shall be disposed of yearly by the Vice-Chancellor for the time being, as he the Vice-Chancellor, the Master of Clare Hall, and the Greek Professor for the time being, or any two of them shall agree. Which three persons aforesaid shall give out a Subject, which Subject shall for the first Year be one or other of the Perfections or Attributes of the Supreme Being, and so the succeeding Years, till the Subject is exhausted; and afterwards the Subject shall be either Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell, Purity of heart, &c. or whatever else may be judged by the Vice-Chancellor, Master of Clare Hall, and Greek Professor, to be most conducive to the honour of the Supreme Being and recommendation of Virtue. And they shall yearly dispose of the Rent of the above Estate to that Master of Arts, whose Poem on the Subject given shall be best approved by them. Which Poem I ordain to be always in English, and to be printed; the expence of which shall be deducted out of the product of the Estate, and the residue given as a reward for the Composer of the Poem, or Ode, or Copy of Verses.*

**W**E the underwritten, do assign Mr. SEATON's Reward to Mr. PORTEUS, M.A. for his Poem on DEATH, and direct the said Poem to be printed, according to the tenor of the Will.

Oct. 8. 1759.

*L. Caryl* Vice-Chancellor.

*J. Wilcox* Master of Clare Hall.

*M. Lort* Greek Professor.



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# DEATH:

A

## POETICAL ESSAY.

**F**RRIEND to the wretch, whom every friend forsakes,  
I woo thee, DEATH! In Fancy's fairy paths  
Let the gay Songster rove, and gently trill  
The strain of empty joy. — Life and its joys  
I leave to those that prize them. — At this hour,  
This solemn hour, when Silence rules the world,  
And wearied Nature makes a gen'ral pause,  
Wrapt in Night's sable robe, through cloysters drear  
And charnels pale, tenanted by a throng  
Of meagre phantoms shooting crosses my path  
With silent glance, I seek the shadowy vale  
Of DEATH. — Deep in a murky cave's recess

Lav'd

Lav'd by Oblivion's listless stream, and fenc'd  
By shelving rocks and intermingled horrors  
Of yew' and cypress' shade from all intrusion  
Of busy noontide-beam, the MONARCH sits  
In unsubstantial Majesty enthron'd.

At his right hand, nearest himself in place  
And frightfulness of form, his Parent SIN  
With fatal industry and cruel care  
Busies herself in pointing all his stings,  
And tipping every shaft with venom drawn  
From her infernal store: around him rang'd  
In terrible array and strange diversity  
Of uncouth shapes, stand his dread Ministers;  
Foremost Old Age, his natural ally  
And firmest friend: next him diseases thick,  
A motley train; Fever with cheek of fire;  
Consumption wan; Palsy, half warm with life,  
And half a clay-cold lump; joint-tort'ring Gout,  
And ever-gnawing Rheum; Convulsion wild;  
Swol'n Dropsy; panting Asthma; Apoplex  
Full-gorg'd. — There too the Pestilence that walks  
In darkness, and the Sickness that destroys

At



## A POETICAL ESSAY.

7

At broad noon-day. — These and a thousand more,  
Horrid to tell, attentive wait ; and, when  
By Heaven's command DEATH waves his ebon wand,  
Sudden rush forth to execute his purpose  
And scatter desolation o'er the Earth.

Ill-fated Man, for whom such various forms  
Of Mis'ry wait, and mark their future prey!  
Ah! why, ALL-RIGHTEOUS FATHER, didst thou make  
This Creature Man? why wake th' unconscious dust  
To life and wretchedness? O better far  
Still had he slept in uncreated night,  
If this the Lot of being! — Was it for this  
Thy breath divine kindled within his breast  
The vital flame? For this was thy fair image  
Stamp'd on his soul in godlike lineaments?  
For this dominion, giv'n him absolute  
O'er all thy creatures, only that he might reign  
Supreme in woe? — From the blest source of Good  
Could Pain and Death proceed? Could such foul Ills  
Fall from fair Mercy's hands? — Far be the thought,  
The impious thought! God never made a creature  
But what was good. — He made a living Man :

The



The Man of Death was made by Man himself.  
Forth from his Maker's hands he sprung to life,  
Fresh with immortal bloom; No pain he knew,  
No fear of Death, no check to his desires  
Save one command. — That one command (which stood  
'Twixt him and ruin, the test of his obedience,)  
Urg'd on by wanton curiosity  
He broke. — There in one moment was undone  
The fairest of God's works. — The same rash hand  
That pluck'd in evil hour the fatal fruit  
Unbarr'd the gates of Hell, and let loose Sin  
And Death and all the family of Pain  
To prey upon Mankind. — Young Nature saw  
The monstrous crew, and shook thro' all her frame.  
Then fled her new-born lustre, then began  
Heav'ns chearful face to low'r, then vapours choak'd  
The troubled air, and form'd a veil of clouds  
To hide the willing Sun. — The Earth convuls'd  
With painful throes threw forth a bristly crop  
Of thorns and briars; and Insect, Bird, and Beast,  
That wont before with admiration fond  
To gaze at Man, and fearless croud around him,

# A POETICAL ESSAY.

9

Now fled before his face, shunning in haste  
Th' infection of his misery. — He alone,  
Who justly might, th' offended Lord of Man,  
Turn'd not away his face, he full of pity  
Forsook not in this uttermost distress  
His best-lov'd work. — That comfort still remain'd,  
(That best that greatest comfort in affliction)  
The countenance of God, and thro' the gloom  
Shot forth some kindly gleams, to chear and warm  
Th' offender's sinking soul. — Hope sent from Heav'n  
Uprais'd his drooping head, and shew'd afar  
A happier scene of things; the PROMIS'D SEED  
Trampling upon the SERPENT's humbled crest,  
DEATH of his sting disarm'd, and the dank grave  
Made pervious to the realms of endless day,  
No more the limit but the gate of life.

Chear'd with the view, MAN went to till the ground  
From whence he rose; sentenc'd indeed to toil  
As to a punishment, yet (ev'n in wrath  
So merciful is Heav'n) this toil became  
The solace of his woes, the sweet employ  
Of many a live-long hour, and surest guard

B

Against



Against disease and Death. — DEATH tho' denounc'd  
Was yet a distant Ill, by feeble arm  
Of Age, his sole support, led slowly on.  
Not then, as since, the short-liv'd sons of men  
Flock'd to his realms in countless multitudes;  
Scarce in the course of twice five hundred years  
One solitary ghost went shiv'ring down  
To his unpeopled shore; — In sober state,  
Through the sequester'd vale of rural life,  
The venerable PATRIARCH guileless held  
The tenor of his way; Labour prepar'd  
His simple fare, and Temp'rance rul'd his board.  
Tir'd with his daily toil, at early eve  
He sunk to sudden rest; gentle and pure  
As breath of evening Zephyr and as sweet  
Were all his slumbers; with the Sun he rose,  
Alert and vigorous as He, to run  
His destin'd course. — Thus nerv'd with Giant Strength  
He stem'd the tide of time, and stood the shock  
Of ages rolling harmless o'er his head.  
At life's meridian point arriv'd, he stood,  
And looking round saw all the vallies fill'd

With



## A POETICAL ESSAY.

11

With nations from his loins; full-well content  
To leave his race thus scatter'd o'er the Earth  
Along the gentle slope of life's decline  
He bent his gradual way, till full of years  
He dropt like mellow fruit into his grave.

Such in the infancy of Time was Man,  
So calm was life, so impotent was DEATH.  
O had he but preserv'd these few remains  
These shatter'd fragments of lost happiness  
Snatch'd by the hand of heav'n from the sad wreck  
Of innocence primæval; still had he liv'd  
Great ev'n in ruin, tho' fall'n, yet not forlorn,  
Though mortal, yet not every where beset  
With Death in every shape! But He, impatient  
To be compleatly wretched, hastes to fill up  
The measure of his woes. — 'Twas Man himself  
Brought Death into the world, And Man himself  
Gave keenness to his darts, quicken'd his pace,  
And multiply'd destruction on mankind.

First Envy, Eldest-Born of Hell embru'd  
Her hands in blood, and taught the Sons of Men  
To make a Death which Nature never made,

And God abhorr'd, with violence rude to break  
The thread of life ere half its length was run,  
And rob a wretched brother of his being.  
With joy Ambition saw, and soon improv'd  
The execrable deed. — 'Twas not enough  
By subtle fraud to snatch a single life,  
Puny impiety ! whole kingdoms fell  
To fate the lust of power ; more horrid still,  
The foulest stain and scandal of our nature  
Became its boast. — *One* Murder made a Villain,  
*Millions* a Hero. — Princes were privileg'd  
To kill, and numbers sanctified the crime.  
Ah ! why will Kings forget that they are Men ?  
And Men that they are brethren ? Why delight  
In human sacrifice ? Why burst the ties  
Of Nature, that should knit their souls together  
In one soft bond of amity and love ?  
Yet still they breathe destruction, still go on  
Inhumanly ingenious to find out  
New pains for life, new terrors for the grave,  
Artificers of Death ! Still Monarchs dream  
Of universal Empire growing up

From



From universal ruin. — Blast the design  
GREAT GOD OF HOSTS, nor let thy creatures fall  
Unpitied victims at Ambition's shrine !

Yet say, should Tyrants learn at last to feel,  
And the loud din of battle cease to bray ;  
Should dove-ey'd Peace o'er all the earth extend  
Her olive branch, and give the world repose,  
Would Death be foil'd? Would health, and strength,  
and youth

Defy his power? Has he no arts in store,  
No other shafts save those of war? — Alas !  
Ev'n in the smile of Peace, that smile which sheds  
A heav'nly sunshine o'er the soul, there basks  
That serpent Luxury : War its thousands slays,  
Peace its ten thousands : In th' embattled plain  
Tho' Death exults, and claps his raven wings,  
Yet reigns he not ev'n there so absolute,  
So merciless, as in yon frantic scenes  
Of midnight revel and tumultuous mirth,  
Where, in th' intoxicating draught conceal'd,  
Or couch'd beneath the glance of lawless Love,  
He snares the simple youth, who nought suspecting  
Means to be blest — But finds himself undone.

Down



Down the smooth stream of life the Stripling darts  
Gay as the morn; bright glows the vernal sky,  
Hope swells his sails, and Passion steers his course;  
Safe glides his little bark along the shore  
Where Virtue takes her stand, but if too far  
He launches forth beyond Discretion's mark,  
Sudden the tempest scowls, the surges roar,  
Blot his fair day, and plunge him in the deep.  
O sad but sure mischance! O happier far  
To lie like gallant HOWE midst Indian wilds  
A breathless corse, cut off by savage hands  
In earliest prime, a generous sacrifice  
To freedom's holy cause; than so to fall  
Torn immature from life's meridian joys,  
A prey to Vice, Intemperance, and Disease.  
Yet die ev'n thus, thus rather perish still,  
Ye Sons of Pleasure, by th' Almighty strick'n,  
Than ever dare (though oft, alas! ye dare)  
To lift against yourselves the murd'rous steel  
To wrest from GOD's own hand the sword of Justice  
And be your own avengers. — Hold rash Man,  
Though with anticipating speed thou'lt rang'd

Through

Through every region of delight, nor left  
One joy to gild the evening of thy days,  
Though life seem one uncomfortable void,  
Guilt at thy heels, before thy face despair,  
Yet gay this scene, and light this load of woe  
Compar'd with thy hereafter. — Think, O think,  
And e'er thou plunge into the vast abyfs,  
Pause on the verge awhile, look down and see  
Thy future mansion. — Why that start of horror?  
From thy slack hand why drops th' uplifted steel?  
Didst thou not think such vengeance must await  
The wretch, that with his crimes all fresh about him  
Rushes irreverent, unprepar'd, uncall'd,  
Into his Maker's presence, throwing back  
With insolent disdain his choicest gift?

Live then, while Heav'n in pity lends thee life,  
And think it all too short to wash away  
By penitential tears and deep contrition  
The scarlet of thy crimes. — So shalt thou find  
Rest to thy soul, so unappall'd shalt meet  
Death when he comes, not wantonly invite  
His ling'ring stroke. — Be it thy sole concern

With



With innocence to live, with patience wait  
Th' appointed hour ; too soon that hour will come  
Tho' Nature run her course ; But Nature's God,  
If need require, by thousand various ways,  
Without thy aid, can shorten that short span,  
And quench the lamp of life. — O when he comes  
Rous'd by the cry of wickedness extreme  
To Heav'n ascending from some guilty land  
Now ripe for vengeance ; when he comes array'd  
In all the terrors of Almighty wrath ;  
Forth from his bosom plucks his ling'ring Arm,  
And on the miscreants pours destruction down !  
Who can abide his coming ? Who can bear  
His whole displeasure ? In no common form  
Death then appears, but starting into Size  
Enormous, measures with gigantic stride  
Th' astonish'd Earth, and from his looks throws round  
Unutterable horror and dismay.  
All Nature lends her aid. — Each Element  
Arms in his cause. — Ope fly the doors of Heav'n,  
The fountains of the deep their barriers break,  
Above, below, the rival torrents pour,

And



And drown Creation, — or in floods of fire  
Descends a livid cataract and consumes  
An impious race. — Sometimes when all seems peace,  
Wakes the grim Whirlwind, and with rude embrace  
Sweeps nations to their grave, or in the deep  
Whelms the proud wooden world; full many a youth  
Floats on his wat'ry bier, or lies unwept  
On some sad desert shore! — At dead of night  
In fullen silence stalks forth PESTILENCE:  
CONTAGION close behind taints all her steps  
With poys'nous dew; no smiting Hand is seen,  
No sound is heard; but soon her secret path  
Is mark'd with desolation; heaps on heaps  
Promiscuous drop: — No friend, no refuge near;  
All, all, is false and treacherous around,  
All that they touch, or taste, or breathe, is DEATH.

But ah! what means that ruinous roar? why fail  
These tott'ring feet? — Earth to its centre feels  
The Godhead's power, and trembling at his touch  
Through all its pillars, and in ev'ry pore,  
Hurls to the ground with one convulsive heave  
Precipitating domes, and towns, and tow'rs,

The work of ages. — Crush'd beneath the weight  
Of gen'ral devastation, millions find  
One common grave; not ev'n a widow left  
To wail her sons: the house, that should protect,  
Entombs its master, and the faithless plain,  
If there he flies for help, with sudden yawn  
Starts from beneath him. — Shield me, gracious Heav'n,  
O snatch me from destruction! If this Globe,  
This solid Globe, which thine own hand hath made  
So firm and sure, if this my steps betray;  
If my own mother Earth from whence I sprung  
Rise up with rage unnatural to devour  
Her wretched offspring, whither shall I fly?  
Where look for succour? Where, but up to thee  
Almighty Father? Save, O save thy suppliant  
From Horrors such as these! — At thy good time  
Let Death approach; I reck not — let him but come  
In genuine form, not with thy vengeance arm'd,  
Too much for Man to bear. — O rather lend  
Thy kindly aid to mitigate his stroke,  
And at that hour when all aghast I stand,  
(A trembling Candidate for thy compassion,)



On this World's brink, and look into the next;  
When my Soul starting from the dark unknown  
Casts back a wishful look, and fondly clings  
To her frail prop, unwilling to be wrench'd  
From this fair scene, from all her custom'd joys,  
And all the lovely relatives of life,  
Then shed thy comforts o'er me; then put on  
The gentlest of thy looks. — Let no dark Crimes  
In all their hideous forms then starting up  
Plant themselves round my couch in grim array,  
And stab my bleeding heart with two-edg'd torture,  
Sense of past guilt, and dread of future woe.  
Far be the ghastly crew! And in their stead,  
Let chearful Memory from her purest cells  
Lead forth a goodly train of Virtues fair  
Cherish'd in earliest youth, now paying back  
With tenfold usury the pious care,  
And pouring o'er my wounds the heav'nly balm  
Of conscious innocence. — But chiefly, THOU,  
Whom soft-ey'd Pity once led down from Heav'n  
To bleed for Man, to teach him how to live,  
And, oh! still harder lesson! how to die,

Dis-

Disdain not Thou to smooth the restless bed  
 Of Sickness and of Pain. — Forgive the tear  
 That feeble Nature drops, calm all her fears,  
 Wake all her hopes, and animate her faith,  
 Till my rapt Soul anticipating Heav'n  
 Bursts from the thralldom of incumbring clay,  
 And on the wing of Extasy upborn  
 Springs into Liberty, and Light, and Life.

**THE END.**

